



GERONTICUS SPINICOLLIS.

Straw-necked Ibis.

New Holland Ibis, Lath. Gen. Hist. of Birds, vol. ix. p. 167.

Ibis spinicollis, Jameson, Edinb. New Phil. Journ., No. xxxvii. p. 213.—Jard. and Selb. Ill. Orn., vol. iv. pl. xvii.

Ibis lamellicollis, LaFres. Mag. de Zool. 1836, Liv. 4^{me} et 5^{me}, pl. 57.

THIS beautiful Ibis has never yet been discovered out of Australia, over the whole of which immense country it is probably distributed, as it is more abundant in certain localities at one season than at another; its presence in fact appears to depend upon whether the season be or be not favourable to increase of the lower animals upon which the vast hordes of this bird feed. After the severe drought of 1839 it was in such abundance on the Liverpool Plains, and on those of the Lower Namoi, that to compute the number in a single flock was impossible. It was also very numerous on the sea side of the great Liverpool range, inhabiting the open down and flats, particularly such as were studded with shallow lagoons, through which it would wade knee-high in search of shelled mollusks, frogs, newts and insects: independently of the food I have mentioned, it feeds on grasshoppers and insects generally. The natives informed me that sometimes many seasons elapse without the bird being seen. Where then does it go? To what country does it pass? Does there not exist a vast oasis in the centre of Australia, to which the bird migrates when it is not found in the located parts of the country? We may reasonably suppose such to be the case.

The Straw-necked Ibis walks over the surface of the ground in a very stately manner; it perches readily on trees, and its flight is both singular and striking, particularly when large flocks are passing over the plains, at one moment showing their white breasts, and at the next, by a change in their position, exhibiting their dark-coloured backs and snow-white tails. During the large semicircular sweeps they take over the plains, and when performing a long flight, they rise tolerably high in the air; the whole flock then arrange themselves in the form of a figure or letter similar to that so frequently observed in flights of geese and ducks.

The note is a loud, hoarse, croaking sound, which may be heard at a considerable distance. When feeding in flocks they are closely packed, and from the constant movement of their bills and tails, the whole mass seems in perpetual motion. In disposition this bird is rather shy than otherwise; still, with a very little care, numerous successful shots may be made with an ordinary fowling-piece.

The sexes when fully adult exhibit the same beautiful metallic colouring of the plumage. The female is however smaller, and has the straw-like appendages on the neck less prolonged and less stout than in the male. Mature birds only have the whole of the head and back of the neck quite bare of feathers.

Head and forepart of the neck naked, and of a dull inky black; back and sides of the neck clothed with white down; on the front of the neck and breast the shafts of the feathers are produced into long lanceolate straw-like and straw-coloured processes, with merely a rudiment of the lateral webs at the base; sides and back of the neck, breast and all the upper surface rich shining bronzy green and purple, crossed, particularly on the wing-coverts, scapularies and outer webs of the secondaries, with numerous bars of dull black; primaries and inner webs of the secondaries dull greenish black; abdomen, flanks, under tail-coverts and tail white; bill dull black, crossed at the base by irregular transverse bars of yellowish brown; irides dark brown; thighs crimson; legs blackish brown, the two colours blending on the knee.

Immature birds have the head and neck clothed with white down, the straw-like appendages less in number, and less of the rich colouring on the breast.

The Plate represents an adult and immature bird, about two-thirds of the natural size.